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ARTISAN: ON BREAD AND A MEANINGFUL LIFE

by

Emerson James

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTERS OF SCIENCE

in

English

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ABSTRACT

Artisan: On Bread and a Meaningful Life

by

Emerson James, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

In the fall of 2009 the cookbook, *Crust and Crumb: Mater Formula's for Serious Bakers* found its way into my hands. Despite no previous experience with baking, I was drawn to the philosophy outlined by the author in the introduction. Peter Reinhart wrote, “Life goes on from moment to moment, experience to experience, and never seems to stop offering lessons for growth. What many people lack, though, is a way to tie these experiences into a meaningful whole, a context in which to experience the connectedness of all creation. Many of these potential life lessons slip past us because we do not have an adequate gathering net. For me, bread is one of those nets.”

This work of creative nonfiction turned to aspects of the bread baking process – kneading, shaping and communion – to frame three lyric essays. Forgoing a linear narrative line to move in the associative manner of poems, each of these steps served to encompass broader themes of what I think contributes to a whole and healthy life: work, the body and the sacred. Bouncing between the science and technique of bread and personal experiences related to these broader themes, this work sought to answer the question, what can bread tell us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life?

(93 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Artisan: On Bread and a Meaningful Life

Emerson James

In 1944, three decades before the start of the artisanal bread movement, H. E. Jacob published *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* capturing bread's cultural, political, religious, and technological impacts over time. In the introduction of the 2007 edition of the text, prominent American baker Peter Reinhart wrote that bread is "inextricably woven into our cultural and personal histories." Reinhart notes that while bread does have its own story, "it is also the medium through which so many other stories are told: stories of escape from bondage; of historical and political battles ...; of the intermingling of the supernatural and mystical into the natural world" (vi).

In the same way, *Artisan: On Bread and a Meaningful Life*, a collection of three nonfiction essays, utilizes aspects of the bread baking processing (kneading, shaping and communion) to explore and tell the author's personal story with work, the body and the scared. Bouncing between the science and technique of bread and personal experiences related to these broader themes, this work sought to answer the question, what can bread tell us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have much gratitude for my teachers: Jonathan Frye, Jennifer Sinor, and Pete Schropp. Thank you also to those in the bread community who welcomed me in, especially Don Guerra and my colleagues at Crumb Brothers Artisan Bread.

This work has benefited from the feedback and support of my early readers. Special thanks to my friends and family for your encouragement and moral support. If you fed me (even once) during this process, you have my heart.

Emerson James

CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
PUBLIC ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
KNEADED.....	22
TEAR.....	45
ANCIENT.....	62

INTRODUCTION

“Life goes on from moment to moment, experience to experience, and never seems to stop offering lessons for growth. What many people lack, though, is a way to tie these experiences into a meaningful whole, a context in which to experience the connectedness of all creation. Many of these potential life lessons slip past us because we do not have an adequate gathering net. For me, bread is one of those nets.”

- Peter Reinhart
Crust and Crumb

Introduction

It is the fall of 2009, my first week of college. I am sitting behind a narrow, blacktopped lab table in the front row of one of the basement classrooms in Melhorn Hall, McPherson College’s science building. The long sides of the rectangular room are lined with wooden drawers and glass-paned cabinets. The building that once housed McPherson city’s natural history museum still has an unusually large number of samples and specimens. A few of the drawers have been pulled open, revealing jar after jar of rocks and minerals, many of them meteorites collected by famed McPherson College professor Harvey Nininger, said to be the father of meteor science. Visible through the glass cabinets are the college’s reptile and amphibian collection – frogs so perfectly preserved in formaldehyde they look as though they could open their eyes and hop around the classroom if only you unscrewed the lid to their jar and exposed them to the air.

Today is the first lab session of the introductory biology class I am enrolled in. Despite the room filling up with students, it remains quiet as we wait for Dr. Frye to appear. During the first lecture period the day before, Dr. Frye had established himself as a formidable presence. It wasn’t that there was anything intimidating about his small five-foot-six stature, dressed in khaki

pants and a short-sleeved button up. It was that you could hear, in the seriousness in which he talked about science, his belief in its power and possibility. He expected that you invest yourself in this discovery. “To understand anything, you have to be able to describe it completely,” he said. “How much you understand depends on how closely you choose to look.”

I am not sure what I anticipated when he came through the door, balancing a cloth-covered basket atop a stack of books, his arms stretching to hold them all. Maybe I thought we’d be given magnifying glasses to help us look more closely at the objects around us. Or perhaps that we would focus on describing our observations, the first step towards understanding. Instead, Dr. Frye emphasized biology as the science of life, suggesting that anything that contributed to it, including eating, was a path to understanding. When he passed around the stack of books, he revealed science of a different kind: cookbooks. Inside the basket, kept warm underneath the towel, was freshly baked bread. Of the books circulating the lab, *Crust and Crumb: Master Formulas for Serious Bread Bakers* found its way into my hands. After a quick scan of the preface, I asked Dr. Frye if I could borrow the book drawn as I was to the philosophy of life the author argued was embodied in bread. Dr. Frye not only agreed, but offered an invitation, significant and lifelong, to go beyond reading and try doing, to come over to his house to bake.

As the time since I was a student at McPherson College grows, so does my gratitude for the education that I received there. A small liberal arts college that then had just 640 students, what McPherson College lacked in rigor it made up for in personal relationship. Of the many ways that I was individually cared for, it is all of the weeks that I baked with Dr. Frye, who quickly became Jonathan, that remain most vivid and continue to shape me.

Bread baking is an art of managing time and honoring process. A loaf of bread with an airy crumb, crunchy crust, and complex flavor might take days to develop, several hours to complete the whole process of baking. Much of that time is not labor but waiting and leaving the dough alone. After first mixing and kneading bread dough, it is often left to rest for hours, rising and gaining volume. Then, a baker might form the loaves and leave them to rise again before putting them in the oven. The first time I went over to Jonathan's house to bake, he already had two batches of dough for the French Boule on that afternoon's menu prepared when I arrived. Jonathan wanted me to be able to experience the full process without the logistical challenge of needing to wait the hours in between. So, he had prepared in advance a batch of dough that had completed its first rise and was ready to be formed, and a batch of dough that he'd formed into loaves and had just about completed its second rise and was ready to be baked.

Ever a balanced teacher, Jonathan didn't want me to miss the real work of bread. The flour, salt and yeast still on the counter, he had me mix a third batch of dough and then demonstrated the appropriate technique for kneading; rising up on his toes, the heel of his palm pressed into the dough, the weight of his body causing the dough to squash forward and flatten. He then folded the dough back towards himself giving it a simultaneous quarter turn. He made it look easy and instinctive, like how someone unconsciously runs their hand through their hair, but I found my own hands and body to be clumsy when it was my turn. Jonathan actually laughed a little at my effort and said, "You knead this dough for fifteen minutes. You'll get better."

As I finished kneading, Jonathan slipped the formed loaves into the oven and we sat down at the kitchen table and chatted while we waited. From time to time Jonathan's wife Leslie would appear from her home office down the hall, called by the aromas released as the crust

browned, a clue that the bread was almost ready for eating. When the timer beeped, none of us could wait the recommended 20 minutes for the bread to cool before cutting into the loaf.

Those first slices of bread I ate at Jonathan's were no doubt tasty and satisfying, but it is not the flavors or pleasures of the bread that stick with me. Instead it is that without obligation or requirement, Jonathan opened his life to and invested in me. Over the years that we baked together, Jonathan provided a window for me to witness one of the ways he had incorporated in his own life the values and application of environmental stewardship and science that he was teaching me in a formalized setting in the classroom: there are underlying laws and phenomenon governing the universe, the world is fundamentally relational, and that creation can only remain healthy and giving (us included) through an ethic of tending and love.

Thus, bread for me has never really been about bread the food. Instead, bread encompassed and translated the academic framework of environmental stewardship that articulated what made the world healthy into a way for me to personally find health and meaning in my own life through a paralleled attention to process, relationship and care.

Having since navigated life unsheltered, I had three experiences that pulled me away from my belief in, and ability to enact, a life committed to process, relationship and care.

A few years after graduating, I found myself working for Utah State University's Office of Research and Graduate Studies as a writer highlighting the research of USU's faculty and students. We easily fall into the flow and trajectory of the environments in which we place ourselves. The Project Management and Communications (PMC) Team had a diverse portfolio of outreach and communications projects, including several large-scale events like the university's TEDx program and a week-long celebration of research initiatives. My job was

focused on strategy, extensive analysis and required intense periods of work that strove for an almost impossible standard of excellence. In addition, serving USU's administrative offices meant constantly facing university politics and bureaucracy. Nestled deep within a hierarchy of administrators with their own agendas, the job felt more and more like a tactical game of power in a fictitious world and became harder and harder for me to fit within my values. It didn't seem to matter that I brought good intentions to the work that I did, believing it to be in service of others; somebody else's trajectory and goals would always trump mine. And so, amid a bunch of upheaval surrounding university politics, tired and frustrated, I quit.

It was also during this time of my life that I found myself in a polarized partnership; the highs and joys of my relationship made me feel like I was breaking into another realm of living, but the lows crippled and harmed me. I'd met my then partner, M., at a local Buddhist Sangha. Our relationship developed in tandem with my own spiritual opening and grew alongside that of the community of Sangha members who helped cultivate a new framework for meeting the world. I had come to the practice out of an intense yearning to be able to have and fully experience the range of human feelings, and M., an artist and musician, expressed quite intensely the full breadth of the human condition. M. often floated between states of radiant joy and creativity to pointed places of anger, sadness and depression. She vocalized a recognition of these swings, shared about her mother's untreated bipolar disorder that led to her being hit as a child and the scar it left: not a physical one, but perhaps something worse, an unseen sense that her very being was threatened, was somehow destined to be undeserving of love.

This, in context with my own early history with mental health – a childhood diagnosis of depression and bipolar disorder for which I was medicated, despite my wishes, for more than a decade – made attractive M.'s alternative narrative of softening, tending to and opening the

heart. I can see now that I wanted to hold space for her suffering in part to prove my own hard-earned stability and because in seeing so much of myself in her, it felt that if I could stand by, accept and love her darkness and unpredictability that I could in turn redeem, accept and love those aspects in myself. Her verbal abuse was one thing to bear, but when M. hit me one December night it became clear that love cannot hold space for everything and I walked away.

For a long time, it was my body itself that served as my refuge: a place intimate, personal and within my control. Regardless of what was happening externally in my life, I could always escape through long hikes in nature or miles on my bicycle. The lines of ridges and pavement would roll past in a soft blur that marked my progress and made me feel capable and strong. But, as a result of a thyroid condition, my body began to express dysfunction, too. I was exhausted most of the time, lost a lot of weight, and, at times, would become so light headed upon standing that I'd fall over. Even my body was efforting to a point of depletion. The hyperactive nodule on the left side of my thyroid was large enough that, at the recommendation of my doctor, I allowed this part of me to be cut out, too.

For me, my first craft and art were bread, and so, when I found myself disoriented and confused, it seemed the place to return to in order to remember and remake what makes life meaningful and satisfying. Thus, I sought to answer what can bread teach us about what it means to have a balanced and meaningful life.

Intersection of Research and Works

Given the importance of attending to process in both bread baking and life, my thesis explores three steps of the bread backing process: kneading, shaping, and communion. Each of

these steps frames and metaphorically informs one essay and encompasses broader themes of what I think contributes to a whole and healthy life: work, the body, and the sacred.

In the introduction to *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay* John D'Agata writes that the lyric essay “eschews the story-driven ambitions of fiction and nonfiction for the associative inquiry of poems” (7). The anthology features fifteen different essays, each featuring their own form. Some borrow structures from other types of texts (outlines, scientific reports, pain scales), whereas others utilize white space to allow the reader to fill in the gap.

Given that this project committed to have an element of bread appear in each essay, cleaving time and space, I adopted the lyric form for each essay of my thesis so that the content could move by association and take different forms on the page. Although I hope that each essay can stand alone as a single piece, a more wholistic picture is gained when read as a collection. A work that explores different types of essays untied together by a common thread is Jennifer Sinor's *Letters Like the Day: On Reading Georgia O'Keeffe*. Common to the nine essays in *Letters Like the Day* is Sinor's experience of reading Georgia O'Keeffe's letters. Because each essay effectively utilizes its own form, Sinor is able to bounce around the timeline of both O'Keeffe and her own life as I did in my own work.

To inform each essay, I researched three areas: (1) the history, cultural context and techniques associated with bread (2) themes of environmental stewardship, place and good work and (3) examples of different creative nonfiction forms.

Work – “Kneaded”

The first essay of my thesis, “Kneaded,” explores the significance of the year I spent as a live-in apprenticeship and cheesemaker at a small micro-dairy in Northern Utah, the Rockhill

Creamery. My desire to work on the farm was significantly influenced by my education in Environmental Stewardship, particularly the work of agrarian writer Wendell Berry. At the time (and still) Berry has shaped my sense of good work, healthy communities and relationship to place.

In the six decades that Berry has written, his work has remained centered around our connection, responsibility to and love of place and its creatures. Three of Berry's essays – “The Pleasure of Eating,” “Health is Membership,” and “It All Turns on Affection” – articulate important ideas present in “Kneaded.”

In “The Pleasures of Eating,” Berry points out all of the ways that the industrialized food system disconnects people from food's source: land and living creatures. As he reasserts that eating is an agricultural act, he makes the argument that how it is that we view and value our food and our desire and willingness to invest in the process of its production parallels our interest and value in life itself. For Berry, the argument that a faster meal provided by the industrial food system grants us more time to work and recreate ourselves as we are “hell bent on increasing the ‘quality’ of our lives,” reveals a “remarkable obliviousness to the causes and effects, the possibilities and the purposes, of the life of the body in this world” (323).

Picking up this question of the true economics of convenience, Berry asks in the essay “Health is Membership,” “What is the point of ‘labor saving’ if by making work effortless we make it poor, and if by doing poor work we weaken our bodies and lose conviviality and health?” (148). For Berry, health is based on wholeness, “not just in the completeness of ourselves but also in the sense of belonging to others and to place” (144). Further, Berry states that “the way to respect the body is to honor fully its materiality. ... Our bodies are involved in the world. Their needs and desires and pleasures are physical. Our bodies hunger and thirst,

yearn toward other bodies, grow tired and seek rest, rise up rested, eager to exert themselves” (146). It is noteworthy that Berry came to write “Health is Membership” as a means to make sense of his experience of his brother John’s illness and hospitalization. What Berry finds incomprehensible is how the mechanicalized hospital intended to promote healing so often fails to consider love.

Berry’s message of an ethic of love has continued to solidify over the decades that he has written. When asked to give a Jefferson Lecture in 2012, one of the highest honors for intellectual achievement in the humanities, Berry presented the essay, “It All Turns on Affection.” In part a meditation on those who find love for the place they are and choose to stay and those who leave with the hope of better things, “It All Turns on Affection” claims the affection that ultimately leads to someone staying is dependent upon imagination.

... imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place (14).

Thus, Berry’s writing establishes a precedent and makes physical the fact that a meaningful life is contingent on the depth of relationship one has to place and people and their ability to embody and make physical care, tending and love.

Just as bread dough is kneaded, as I work to understand the push and pull between the hardship and satisfaction of the work and relationships I embodied at Rockhill, specifically my relationship with my boss, Pete, some of Berry’s lines are directly incorporated in “Kneaded.” Most of Berry’s ideas, however, are encompassed by short sections of text that articulate the

process and function of kneading itself. For example, following the first scene of the essay I include these lines:

To me, one of the most unique and important aspects of bread baking is its tactile nature. In asking you to mix the dough by hand, I am asking you to think of your hand as an implement. Mixing by hand is easier than using a mixer, is fully effective, and teaches you to feel the dough (Forkish 3).

Modeled on Jennifer Sinor’s essay, “More Feeling Than Brain,” where Sinor pairs scenes of personal experience with lines from Georgia O’Keeffe’s letters to guide the reader’s understanding of the narrative line, the sections on kneading inform the reader through association as to the significance of each Rockhill scene.

Where Sinor relies on a single voice, that of O’Keeffe, the language of kneading comes from cookbooks – *The Book of Bread*, *The Bread Bible: 300 Favorite Recipes*, *Crust and Crumb: Master Formulas for Serious Bread Bakers*, and *Flour Water Salt Yeast: The Fundamentals of Artisan Bread and Pizza* – speaking the philosophies of the four bakers who wrote them. In this essay, I work to knead, or integrate, them all.

The Body – “Tear”

In “A Braided Heart,” an essay that uses the baking and braiding of *challah* bread as its central metaphor, Brenda Miller describes the lyric essay as “a collage, a montage, or mosaic ... disjunctive, paratactic, segmented and sectioned” (16). Pointing towards the lyric’s essay’s fragmentation Miller states that the lyric “invites the reader [and writer] into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than what is already know” (16). The form allows the writer to juxtapose images that arise organically and intuitively, merging the inner world through personal narrative, with external ideas and threads of thought.

My second essay, “Tear,” began with a desire to understand a newfound and fanatic practice of distance running that arose in tandem with an encompassing bout of depression. At the time of writing the essay, I worked at Crumb Brothers Artisan Bread (where I worked for six months as a pastry chef and six months making bread, recognizing the importance of direct experience with one’s material for metaphors and meaning to emerge). As a former, I shaped hundreds of loaves of bread each week, allowing me to engage with the aspect of the bread backing process intended to inform this essay on the body.

When I first began writing, I didn’t see the connection between distance running, my emotional landscape and the shaping of bread, so I adopted the sectioned format that Miller utilized in both “A Braided Heart” and “A Thousand Buddhas” to allow the scenes of running and moments of shaping that naturally emerged to sit side-by-side on the page. The shaping of loaves revealed the dough’s organic ability to maintain strength and balance in response to environmental conditions through release and rest, whereas my practice of distance running demonstrated an attempt to contain and exert in response to the state of depression that surrounded me.

In the craft piece “The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer: A Case Study,” Miller writes that by allowing the form to dictate the content the writer can “get out of their own way,” and therefore, “bypass what ... [they] already determined as ‘their story’ and instead become open and available.” This ability to get out of my own way proved important in discovering the actual subject of “Tear.” As I contemplated the disparity between the two responses outlined on the page, I found myself posed with an interesting syllogism. If I believed the processes and responses of bread as a living and organic organism to represent the needs and responses of my own body (release and rest) then why was it that I was engaging in the opposite (containment

and effort) through running. What opened in the essay was an investigation of how I have carried and coped with a childhood diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Through the essay, I was able to recognize how associated narratives about the acceptability of my emotions and their expression led to a fear of inhabiting my sensing body and a consequent repression of feelings.

In the introduction to *The Solace of Open Space*, Gretel Ehrlich explains that the book, “originally conceived as a straight-through narrative” instead became a “riprap” in which the “detours became the actual path; the digressions in the writing, the narrative” (x). Instead of writing directly about her grief at the loss of a partner, she let her narrative be held together by place, Wyoming, the landscape in which she was able to abide. It is as though the landscape is speaking what Ehrlich cannot; that we are invariably subjected to and weathered by circumstance and our environment, often stripped bare and left raw, and that it is in this emptiness that we are purified and prepared to receive beauty and honor the fullness of life. *The Solace of Open Space* provided me a model of how place (or in the case of my thesis bread) and writing itself can embody what we cannot approach directly, as was the case in considering my childhood in “Tear.”

The Sacred – “Ancient”

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on her background as scientist and member of the Citizen Band Potawatomi to braid together a cosmology of the world and subsequent ethic to care for it that recognizes both the empirical and spiritual. Illustrated repeatedly in *Braiding Sweetgrass* through Kimmerer’s science and personal narrative is the idea of honorable harvest. “In order to live, I must consume,” writes Kimmerer. “That’s the way the world works, the exchange of a life

for a life, the endless cycling between my body and the body of the world” (177). In describing her process of asking permission of wild leeks to be harvested, Kimmerer touches a balance between the pragmatic and the sacred that I strove to discover for myself in my own experience with bread. “Asking permission shows respect for the personhood of the plant, but it is also an assessment of the well-being of the population. ... The analytic left (brain) reads the empirical signs. ... The intuitive right hemisphere is reading something else, a sense of the generosity, an open-handed radiance that says *take me*.” It is notable that Kimmerer acknowledges the “personhood of the plant,” recognizing the sentients and autonomy of the earth that we must take from to survive.

Similar to the indigenous perspective Kimmerer brings to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Enrique Salmón explores the intersections between land, food and culture in his book *Eating the Landscape*. Drawing from his own Rarámuri culture, Salmón echoes many of the themes addressed by Berry and Kimmerer: the importance of participation in a reciprocal relationship with the land, the connection between each group's cultural identity and their ecosystems, and the correlation of land consciousness and food consciousness. What he adds is the idea that eating is not only a cultural act, but an act of memory that solidifies identity (Salmón 8).

While I read two historical accounts of the history of bread – H. E. Jacob’s *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* and William Rubel’s *Bread: A Global History* – the two texts ultimately informed my thesis very little. What stood out in Jacob’s scholarship is that there is not much to be said about how bread as food has changed overtime. In fact, bread’s biggest development was the accidental discovery of leavening, some 6,000 years ago, when a curious Egyptian noticed that a forgotten bowl of porridge, left exposed to the air, had a new-found activity and decided to cook it over the fire (Jacob 26). Despite marginal changes in

technique, bread warrants its own volume because of the ways that humans have imbedded social, economic, cultural and spiritual significance in each loaf.

In the forward to the 2007 edition of the book, Peter Reinhart reinforces that bread is “inextricably woven into our cultural and personal histories.” He notes that while bread does have its own story, “it is also the medium through which so many other stories are told: stories of escape from bondage; of historical and political battles ...; of the intermingling of the supernatural and mystical into the natural world” (vi).

What proved most illustrative of the relationship between bread, culture, the spiritual and the natural world was looking at it through the lens of folk art and material culture. In the spring of 2019, as part of a class on the subject, I wrote a research paper of the intersection of foodways and bread as an object of folk art and material culture. Where previous research recognized the expression of religious and ethnic identities through particular types of bread such as the challah or croissant (Steinber; Hopkin), my paper sought to explore the process of baking, from the procurement of materials to the eating of the loaf and the unique perspective and philosophy that bakers add to our cultural and spiritual understanding of ourselves. Upon learning about the work of Don Guerra, an artisanal baker in Tucson, Arizona who has received recognition (including a James Beard Award) for his work with local heritage grains, I went to Tucson to interview him.

During our two-hour conversation, three themes or areas of emphasis emerged in Don’s work. At its center was his attention to the craft and technique of bread baking, what Don called the “economic engine.” But more important to him was his relationship and commitment to place (enacted through his restoration and cultivation of a local grain, Sonora Wheat) and the community he fed. Don embodied what foodways scholar Lucy M. Long wrote in the introduction to the *Food and Folklore Reader*,

Food connects us all. It connects individuals to their past, places, and other people as well as to the larger culture and society surrounding them. ... Through its production and procurement, food connects us to the earth, physical spaces, and the natural cycles; and access to and distribution of food is shaped by and connected to politics, economics, religion and every other construction of human kind (1).

This relationship between our larger culture and the connection to the earth became foundation in the final essay of my thesis.

“Ancient,” emerged from three encounters with whales: one dead, one that I chased, and one that I believe came to me. With Kimmerer’s ideas of asking and reciprocity in mind, juxtaposed with my pilgrimage to meet Don and the example he provided of what a dedicated life to renewal and creation can manifest, I came to see that each encounter with the whales encapsulated the evolution of my relationship and response to the earth, it’s pain and offering.

In the essay “Tallgrass,” written for the Remembrance Day for Lost Species, Kimmerer writes, “I refuse to write a eulogy for one alone, because the very notion of separability is at the root of the crisis we have created. The life of one is inseparable from the life of another. Our work is not to eulogize them, but to fuel the fires of renewal.”

I now can see now that the grief I felt and subsequent turning away from the environmental loss surrounding us served to eulogize something that was not already dead or absent. It was an action that came from an ideology of lack. For me, the most important scene of “Ancient” is when I bow before the whale vertebrae: mind grounded, heart higher, womb highest. Hands pressed to ancient marrow, I trust in regeneration.

Conclusion

When I first articulated my thesis question, what can bread teach us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life, I was skeptical that I would come to the end of my thesis with clear answers; I really just wanted a reason to bake again. In the way that the universe has a sense of humor, writing about bread grew my intellectual knowledge, but did not lead to more baking. Even when I worked at Crumb Brothers, because of the scale of production, my role was limited to forming: I didn't bake a single loaf. For a long time, I'd dreamed about working at a professional bakery, but while there I often found myself just as replaceable and frustrated as when I worked at the university. Instead, I was happiest when writing about cheese, about Rockhill, the space in my life I have been most able to attend to process, relationship and care.

As a result of my thesis, I know, with certainty, that I am a maker. I also know that for me, it is not enough to know just one part of the process; I want to see the whole picture, beginning to end. This, of course, isn't always possible, but I recognize more clearly now how attention to scale and time give me more of a chance to have an integrated life.

In a conversation hosted by the Schumacher Center for Economics between Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson on the subject of homecoming, Berry said:

Choosing a place is like choosing in any other relationship. Once the commitment is made, then I think you are eligible for certain rewards. I don't think that they will be the ones you foresee, I don't think they will come on a schedule prescribed by you, but I do think there will be rewards. Places have limits. Human relationships have limits. When you hit the limit, you think, 'This is it, I'll have to try for something else now.' But you keep on. And then, somehow, the situation opens up and you begin to see more than you saw before.

This philosophy – make the commitment, the rewards will come, *keep on* – seems applicable not only to the process of writing my thesis, but to my continued writing practice, and for how I want to live my life.

In regards to my thesis, there were many moments where I wanted to move on from bread. That said, had I not had the constraints and incentives of the project I don't know if I would have pursued professional baking experience, had the courage to drive to Tucson to talk with Don, or recognized how important Rockhill is to me. Though I have hit the time limit of the work I can do on the project for graduate school, I do not feel done with the collection. As they stand now, although doing interesting work, both "Tear" and "Ancient" leave the reader without a single idea or takeaway and therefore warrant revisions before pursuing publication. In addition, the proposed project entailed four essays (kneading, shaping, rising, and communion) where my thesis currently only has three. I would like to complete the fourth essay, rising, so that I, and the collection, address love.

At the onset of graduate school, I had not taken a single class in creative writing. I had, however, spent four years at Research and Graduate Studies where I wrote a tremendous amount only to watch, again and again, other people say the sentences I'd labored over as if they were theirs. Even then, I knew that the decision to leave my grown-up job and switch fields was a gift to myself. To make sense of other people's passions and experiences did not fulfill my long felt pull towards language and writing; I needed to claim my own thoughts and experiences and see what I was capable of. In the same way that I was drawn to science and meditation for the ways in which these

practices help us to slow down and look, writing has become integrated into the way I see the world.

One of the first lessons I received on craft was that writing often comes from one of three places: sound, sense or idea. It was pointed out to me then (and is my propensity now) that my writing is driven by idea. I have noticed, however, a shift in my writing as a result of three aspects of craft – attention to setting, scene and verb. All three incline towards the physical and embodied. It did not surprise me that attention to land, place and process were present in my thesis. The degree I wrote about my own body did. Though not having an overt presence in my thesis, and despite an androgynous and gender-neutral identity, I often found myself thinking about my womb. This is an area I'd like to commit to explore and see how in wrestling with it on the page, my understanding might open.

In the larger arch of my life, I plan to stay here in Logan. I'd like to see the ratio of bind weed to native plants in my yard switch, have a shed conversion to writing space project to finish, people too dear to say goodbye to. Let's just say, I still feel like I have more looking and tending to do to be "eligible for certain rewards."

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